

Correctional facility adding inmate transition prep

BY BOB BRALEY

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ALBION — Chain O' Lakes Correctional Facility is making changes to help its inmates change habits for the better.

The Indiana Department of Correction is adjusting how things are done at the minimum-security prison, said its superintendent, Michael W. Cunegin II. "We're now going to be changing to more of a transitional component."

While Chain O' Lakes will still be a working camp, it will also be working to help the people imprisoned there get ready to go back to the real world, Cunegin said.

Inmates at the prison are told when to get up, when to eat, and when to do almost every other activity in their lives, Cunegin said. For inmates, to leave that structure and go into a world where they have to decide when and how to do things on their own can be an added challenge, one some of them don't need.

That's why some simple changes will take place starting in September, Cunegin said. "We're going to start weaning."

In a working camp such as

Chain O' Lakes, from which work crews of prisoners are sent on specific, scheduled tasks, the prisoners know when they have to be where they need to be for their details, Cunegin said. Now it will be those prisoners' responsibility to get where they need to be ready and on time.

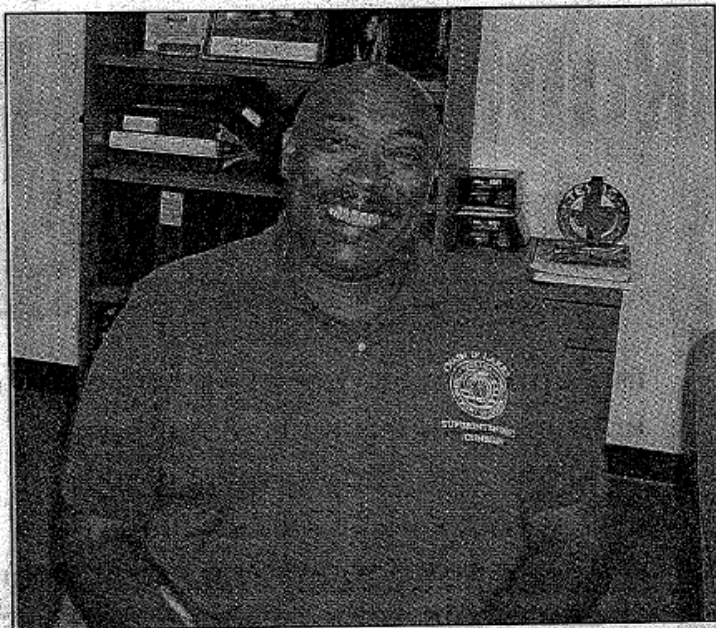
There will also be a variety of programs designed to help prisoners adapt that will either expand or be added, Cunegin said.

For instance, the prison has always had substance abuse classes, but a new component, Celebrate Recovery, has been added, Cunegin said. Celebrate Recovery is similar to Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous and has a religious component.

Celebrate Recovery will come in free of charge thanks to a grant that Allen County Community Corrections received from the U.S. Department of Justice, Cunegin said. "We're going to start small — 10 to 15 offenders."

Also offered will be classes on Thinking For a Change and Dress For Success, Cunegin said.

"We want to make sure that we



FILE PHOTO BY BOB BRALEY

Michael W. Cunegin II, superintendent of Chain O' Lakes Correctional Facility in rural Albion, says the minimum security prison is adding programs to help inmates make the transition back into the real world more easily.

prepare them ... as much as they expected of them." can be for what's going to be

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Dress For Success will be offered by a nonprofit group called Blue Jacket, which will also offer training in how to prepare a resume, Cunegin said.

The prison is working with Aramark on another program, Inmate to Workmate, which will give participants the skills to go into restaurant work, or even open a restaurant, Cunegin said. It's a more-than-800-hour process. "They're going to be leaving with a certificate from the (U.S.) Department of Labor," he added.

Another training program will be refurbishing bicycles. Training available will continue to include getting a GED, Cunegin said.

The programs stem from conversations between Cunegin and DOC Commissioner Edwin G. Buss. "Commissioner Buss has challenged me," Cunegin said. "We want to be able to provide whatever we can for them ... We will make it happen and we will do it well."

The key is that, when

these people go home after serving their time, no one wants them to return to prisons or go to their county jails to serve time for new offenses, and learning skills to fit into the world outside helps avoid that, Cunegin explained.

The men need to be able to succeed in going to their real home, which could be anywhere from Hobart to Valparaiso to Vincennes, Cunegin said. "We get offenders from everywhere."

Stopping recidivism benefits not only the offenders and their families, but taxpayers and communities, Cunegin explained.

The prisoners are already working to better the community, between work crews and services for nonprofit groups, Cunegin said.

Prisoners raise money when outside food vendors, such as KFC and the Albion Subway, come in, and the money goes to groups such as Stop Child Abuse Now and Black Pine Animal Park.

Several offenders made picnic tables for the staff and

children at the Indiana Department of Child Services' Albion facility, Cunegin said. The specialty tables have built-in activities to help children with what can be a difficult time.

The men doing such things find they can do good things, maybe for the first time for some, Cunegin said. "They feel so excited about doing things for the community."

To help with family matters, programs such as a spouse enrichment effort and the Inside Out Dads program help make the connection. Most, if not all, of the inmates love their children, but issues like substance abuse can block the expression of that love.

Some inmates will be able to earn special guided visits with their children if they have completed special programs first, Cunegin said.

The key is understanding what brought these men to prison in the first place, Cunegin explained. "Somebody made a bad choice. ... Those choices can be overcome."